

The Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and **the Russian rockers Pussy Riot are among the creatives on a list of the 100 most influential art figures.** Topping the list, put out by ArtReview magazine, is the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Ai is the highest-rated artist, placing third, ahead of the likes of Damien Hirst



A painting by Gerhard Richter owned by the British guitarist Eric Clapton has sold for US\$34.2 million (Dh126m), **a record for the work of a living artist.** An anonymous bidder bought the red, blue and yellow oil painting on canvas, *Abstraktes Bild (809-4)*, at Sotheby's London



* going, going, gone

Opera Gallery is a worldwide network of galleries with outposts from Seoul to Florida. It looks after works from a broad sweep of art history – Salvador Dali shares a roster with Banksy, while the Chinese painter Yue Minjun is listed alongside Gustav Klimt. Opera hosts the company's first-ever auction in its DIFC branch this evening, and the event is a first for all 11 of its galleries worldwide. Opera Gallery Dubai's director Mariam Hodge believes there's a hunger among the local market for exactly the sort of eclecticism that the gallery's broad coverage can provide.

"Dubai and the UAE are coming of age in the world of art," says Hodge. "There is a fresh and invigorating awareness in the attitude of the UAE's residents towards art. The local clientele are becoming discerning collectors with a thirst for fine works."

How robust that thirst is will be tested this evening, when 140 works with a wildly diverse range of estimates go under the hammer.

There's a scene on a prairie by Claude Monet, with a top estimate of US\$1 million (Dh3.67m); a late 1880s work



Dahlia Unicornus by Salvador Dali.

by Pierre-Auguste Renoir; and plenty of diverse Dali works. Later in the evening, there are ceramics by Pablo Picasso and a whole selection of modern Indian artists (including a painting by the late, great MF Hussain), then a set of calligraphers, Iranian photographers and even a few more emergent names from the Middle East.

Doing away with the standard grouping of an auction curated around a region or an era of art history could prove hazardous to coherence. But Hodge says that the works have been chosen to attract a variety of clients. "By commencing a series of worldwide auctions starting in Dubai, we do not intend to compete with some of the more recognised auction houses but rather enhance the service provided by offering alternative styles of art work to the UAE marketplace."

Hodge says that this is the first of a series of auctions and Dubai will host two annually. But with Christie's restarting its auction season with a sale at Jumeirah Emirates Towers tomorrow and Wednesday, it remains to be seen how this newcomer to the auction calendar will fare.

● **Opera Gallery's auction starts at 7pm at the Ritz Carlton, DIFC. Visit www.operagallery.com for details**

★ **Christopher Lord**

A dream broken free

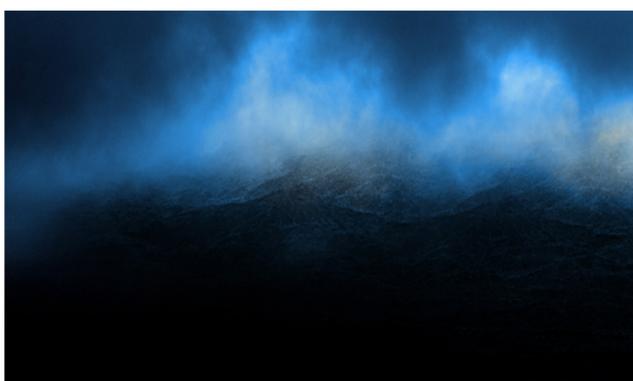
Christopher Lord speaks to Sami Al Karim, whose art making practice found strength in Abu Ghraib

Sami Al Karim's first solo show took place behind the walls of Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, where he was incarcerated for three years in the late 1980s.

"There was a small layer of salt on the cement walls and I used a piece of wood to make the outline of my paintings," Al Karim says, as his solo show *Rebirth* opens at DIFC's XVA Gallery. "I had to erase the whole show before the morning when the guards visited the cells."

The artist was 20 years old when he entered the prison. A series of public artworks had raised the ire of the authorities during Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime and he was jailed alongside other political prisoners. "That prison was my first university; the people around me were well educated and I learnt a lot from their critique of my work. Through them, I experienced the real meaning of freedom, hope and life," he says.

Four series are currently on show at XVA and they chart six years of the artist's developing practice. The *Dream* series from 2005, after Al Karim escaped Iraq for Colorado, is particularly poignant to those early experiences in Abu Ghraib. In these photographic prints, we see gaseous cloudforms as they roll landward across an indistinct ocean. Harking back to his early training as a painter, these softened, yet brooding colours have some Turner-esque echoes as they subtly mingle yet remain utterly distinct from the blackened sea. "Those images stayed in my mind from of a very simple dream I had when I was in prison," Al Karim says. "It came to me when I was trying to imagine the outdoors."



Like his brother Halim, arguably the more famous of the two artists and best known for his images of blurred figures with arresting and overly sharpened eyes, Sami Al Karim's work has manipulated portraits at its core. *Defacement* is a collection of assemblages of spliced-together photographs found at a flea market in the US. Despite the visual leads in these collages – such as a hunter's breeches, a bangled arm and a hand

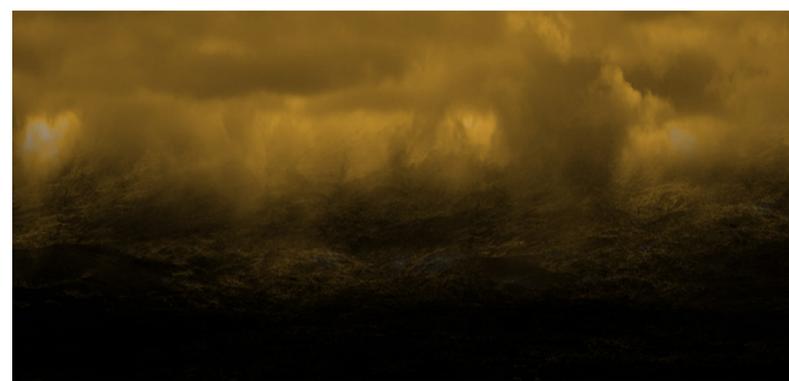
grasping statesman-style at a jacket lapel – we're still left grasping at a tangible sense of what's going on.

The *Rebirth* images, however, are a little more directive. In this lineup of women's faces, we see ashen aerial photographs of near-abandoned towns superimposed on their faces.

"These are actually the front line towns between Iraq and Iran," says Al Karim, who counters the sugges-

Above, works from Sami Al Karim's Dream series which, he says, were born out of scenes he saw in his mind during his time as a political prisoner.

Courtesy the artist / XVA Gallery



tion that, despite the title of the works referring to some return to innocence, the maps appear like scars upon these faces. "We have to have the ability to learn and start from a point of destruction," he says.

These incidental monuments to one of recent history's most bloody conflicts are a reminder that time moves on. Scars remain and slowly fade but hope, according to Al Ka-

rim, persists and this is the rebirth he refers to. "I experienced that rebirth myself," he says. "Nothing is perfect. Life is not perfect. My dream has not been achieved 100 per cent yet, because I still see ugliness around me in this world. But this is just one drop in the ocean."

● **Until November 15 at XVA Gallery, Building 7, DIFC Gate Village. Visit www.xvagallery.com or call 04 358 5172**

It came to me when I was trying to imagine the outdoors

Sami Al Karim artist



Hypnotised by time and space

At some point, even our dreams begin to show their age. That's the line of inquiry in the Portuguese artist Gil Heitor Cortesão's seemingly photorealist paintings.

Don't be deceived by the cleanliness and apparent accuracy as they appear here: viewed up close, we see the blemishes and crow's feet of dilapidation emerge as high-design interiors give way to corruption.

Coming Home, Cortesão's solo show at Carbon 12 in Dubai, continues until November 1. The works expand upon previous collections exhibited in the emirate – a fascination with a modernist aesthetic of design that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s. It's a world of exposed wood, clean and airy spaces, globulous furniture and hard, bright plastics. Perhaps we can see the misty, pine-filled forests of Bern beyond their windows, or an immaculate Californian sky.

Yet the artist's previous body of work depicted the dimensions of these staid, hard-lined environments subtly warping. A milde wash of paint brought a sense of ruin to these once futuristic then retro now ruined environments. The decline of the dreams of the modernist era is epitomised by the abandonment of its clean, unfettered interiors.

Cortesão takes the viewer outside to clairvoyant locations in the woods, where mere foundations show what could have been and nature itself is intruding into the artist's spaces.

"I always find that in photographs of houses from the 1960s that I collect, there is a place reserved for nature – like a tree, or a small house plant – and it always functions as part of the decoration," says Cortesão. He explains that these images explore what the scene might look like if

this greenery started to dominate its environment. Indeed, in perhaps the most evocative image here, a triptych shows a wood panelled room slowly erupting with greenery. A plant seems to soar into the high rafters, outgrowing its perimeters and towering over the space.

Another work shows even the most basic of intrusions being returned to the Earth: *Platform* is a wooden foundation nestled in a grove of trees. It's a stark, plywood monument and, like archaeologists, we're left to speculate on what could have been.

The process of creating these images is particularly curious. Cortesão paints layer after layer of the image on to Plexiglas, yet presents the reverse side of the work when he exhibits. "I want to get the viewer to feel that they're at a distance," he says, "to enter these spaces as if they're in hypnosis."

● **Until November 1 at Carbon 12, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai. Visit www.carbon12dubai.com**

★ **Christopher Lord**

Above, Large Interior and below, Platform, two works by the artist Gil Heitor Cortesão.
Courtesy the artist / Carbon 12 Gallery

